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Black Elk Speaks: Being The Life Story Of A Holy Man Of The Oglala Sioux



Synopsis

The most famous Native American book ever written, *Black Elk Speaks* is the acclaimed story of Lakota visionary and healer Nicholas Black Elk (1863–1950) and his people during the momentous, twilight years of the nineteenth century. Black Elk grew up in a time when white settlers were invading the Lakotas' homeland, decimating buffalo herds and threatening to extinguish their way of life. Black Elk and other Lakotas fought back, a dogged resistance that resulted in a remarkable victory at the Little Bighorn and an unspeakable tragedy at Wounded Knee. Beautifully told through the celebrated poet and writer John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* offers much more than a life story. Black Elk's profound and arresting religious visions of the unity of humanity and the world around him have transformed his account into a venerated spiritual classic. Whether appreciated as a collaborative autobiography, a history of a Native American nation, or an enduring spiritual testament for all humankind, *Black Elk Speaks* is unforgettable. This special edition features all three prefaces to *Black Elk Speaks* that John G. Neihardt wrote at different points in his life, a map of Black Elk's world, a reset text with Lakota words reproduced using the latest orthographic standards, and color paintings by Lakota artist Standing Bear that have not been widely available for decades.

Book Information

Paperback: 298 pages

Publisher: University of Nebraska Press (August 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0803283598

ISBN-13: 978-0803283596

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (252 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I didn't read this edition; a little paperback version came to me. I read it long ago and read it again recently. This book had an incredible impact on me. Over the years people have come to criticize

the author, John Neidhardt. The book ends somewhat abruptly not long after Wounded Knee and then there is an account of Black Elk's prayer on Harney Peak when he was an old man and he asked to make his people live again kind of tacked on the end. Many seem to feel Neidhardt was exploiting Black Elk to get a book out of him. I don't claim to be an expert on Black Elk and this subject, but from what I know I do not agree with the totally cynical assessment. Black Elk had been off the reservation in the Buffalo Bill Show and given his experiences he was hardly naive or ignorant. Black Elk's son Ben had been in the Carlyle school so he would have known if the book did not reflect his father's vision and words and life. The book was also not an instant bestseller. Neidhardt promoted this book and Black Elk's vision tirelessly until the end of his life and I truly believe it was because he saw the incredible spiritual nature of Black Elk, his life, and visions. And his "great vision" as a youngster can only be described as cataclysmic and psychedelic. When the spirits want you to see something you will see it and no drugs are necessary. Neidhardt left out the ensuing years on Pine Ridge Reservation and Black Elk's acceptance of Catholicism to frame a lost way of life, the sadness and injustice of it, and the greatness and seeming inevitability of Black Elk's vision. I believe any poetic license taken was in service of bringing forth a greater truth. The book was not meant to be a biography or history of the Lakota, but to preserve Black Elk's vision and so the purpose of the book was accomplished.

I was a student at the time when various fields (Native American studies, Women studies, Afro-American studies, etc.) were just being established, and although I took a minor in anthropology, I never got into the topics underwritten by these new departments. Since I also worked in the book store, I was aware that two of the key texts for Native American studies were *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and *Black Elk Speaks*. Sad to say, but it took me nearly 30 years before I read either book. The former book was written by a sympathetic outsider who painted the American Indian as a helpless victim of European greed--which for the most part he was/is. The latter was dictated to an interested party, John G. Neihardt, and is the words and reminiscences of Nicholas Black Elk, who witnessed as a child or participated in as an adult, some of the major events of the American Indian Wars that were the outcome of the US expansion into the West. For those of us reared on John Ford westerns, manifest destiny and pioneering had a patriotic ring, as well they might most of them having been made in the years immediately following WWII. In the social souring of the sixties and seventies that brought so many discontented groups vocally into the foreground, it became more obvious that the expression of manifest destiny by our European forebearers spelled manifest disaster for the Native American populations across the country. An

outgrowth of the discontent of the "younger generation" was the establishment of the afore said departments. That of American Indian studies introduced us to the more honest, or at least more balanced, story of the indigenous people of the country. Black Elk Speaks is a superb eye witness account of the Sioux experience with European expansion into the Dakotas.

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